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ABSTRACT

Transactional Analysis as it can be applied to the needs of the school counselor and school psychologist is discussed. An overview of the major tenents of transactional analysis is presented, followed by a descriptive diagnosis of operating ego states. Game playing on the parts of parents and psychologists is discussed and the author concludes with a summary of appropriate counselor responses. It is emphasized that the purpose in proposing the Transactional Analysis model has been to aid the psychologist in organizing counseling data and in generating desirable counseling responses. In addition, it is believed that the school psychologist should find the model useful for inservice training programs designed to increase the proficiency of teachers and consultants in analyzing problems in parent counseling and parent conferences. While the theory is not proposed as an all inclusive answer, or the only available model, it is advanced as a very helpful tool. (Author/BW)

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TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS: A THEORETICAL POSITION AS AN AID IN PARENT COUNSELING

--By: Dr. Richard R. Whittlesey

"...there is nothing so practical as a good theory"

Lewin

One of the most important emerging roles assumed by the psychologist is that of counselor and advisor to parents. Limited counseling personnel in the public schools and either a lack of appropriate referral agencies or long waiting lists have served to stimulate the psychologist's role as counselor. This role has not been entirely dictated to the school psychologist. There are numerous reasons why effective counselling can supplement other interventions and maximize the psychologist's impact with any given child.

While the psychologist's influence on a child in the school setting accounts for approximately six of the child's waking hours, this represents only a small portion of the child's daily time spent learning and adapting. If the school psychologist wishes to maximize his potential as a change agent, it is necessary that he broaden his sphere to include the home environment.

In addition, the increasing concern with role definition and accountability requires that the school psychologist be more responsive to the needs of the public and that he make his services more relevant and visible. Certainly, direct involvement with parents working on problems of achievement, behavior control and home management would place him at the heart of many problems and direct his efforts toward the voting and judging public. The need for help in the home is well documented -- that the school psychologist is the logical person to supply this help seems evident.

It is also apparent, however, that most school psychologists have not had the prerequisite training or practicum experience necessary to maximize their effectiveness in the counseling situation. Graduate training programs have not emphasized counseling because traditionally this function represented a rather

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small amount of the time spent in their work situation. Since increased involvement in parent counseling and parent conferences appears a viable new priority with the psychologist, additional training is required. How, then, is the psychologist to gain the necessary training and develop the required skills?

It is the purpose of this paper to present one schema that has demonstrated potential for being a feasible tool for the school psychologist as counselor. The theoretical model proposed seems most appropriate in conceptualizing the interaction that occurs between parent and psychologist in the counseling session. The application, however, is not limited to counseling but may be broadened to include the social interaction occurring during parent conferences. The necessity of operating from a model is well documented in counseling research and is a powerful method for reducing confusion and synthesizing data that is being generated in the counseling interview.

Unlike many counseling situations, the relationship between the parent and the school psychologist can not be viewed as just another human interaction. The parent brings to the counseling session all of the attitudes, feelings, and reactions that have been developed toward and generally reserved for school personnel. Thus, the psychologist will experience the brunt of the parent's attitude to the agency with which he is associated -- the school system.

Also, the psychologist is often projected into Berne's "Parental" role due to his position as an expert and authority figure. By virtue of assuming this role, he can expect some rather consistent and stereotyped responses from parents who rely on characteristic styles of interaction to structure their world. Thus, the psychologist will encounter a number of inherent problems in parental counseling which must be recognized and counteracted if counseling goals are to be achieved. From the author's experience outside of school psychology (hospitals, counseling and guidance centers) and from his experience in the public school setting, it has been evident that the role attributed the school psychologist stimulates several specific types of interactions or, in Berne's terminology, games.

Thus, the unique relevancy of this theory is due to situational and context variables which thrust the psychologist into expected and predictable roles in counseling interactions. The value of Transactional Analysis as an explanatory model depends on the theory's utility and value as a source of relevant and appropriate counselor responses.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE MAJOR TENETS OF TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS

In this section, a cursory summary of the major postulates of Berne's theory is offered as a framework for later discussion. While the theoretical position is somewhat complex, the understanding of transactional analysis requires an additional vocabulary of only six words.

Exteropsyche (Parent), neopsyche (Adult), and archeopsyche (Child) are the three ego states. An ego state may be described phenomenologically as a coherent system of feelings and operationaliy as a set of coherent behavior patterns (Berne, 1964, p. 23). These three psychic organs exist as states of mind in each individual and are not to be construed as theoretical constructs. The three ego states represent the structure of personality according to Berne's system. Each individual has the potential to act from any of the three ego states, but characteristically produces behavioral events that can be classified as coming from one of the ego states. Thus it is possible to classify both the individual and his actions as either Parental, Adult, or Childlike.

The Child ego state is recognized by gestures, posture, vocabulary and feelings that are relics of one's childhood and are breakthroughs or fixations of early attitudes. Descriptively, the Child is spontaneous, lonely, confused, coy, impulsive, self-indulgent, tells jokes, gets drunk at parties, swears, and in general shows less inhibitions than would be expected if one learns from his environment or adopts the attitudes of his parents. The healthy qualities of the Child are charm, pleasure, creativity, and healthy expression which leads to vitality and happiness.

The Adult is necessary for survival. It processes data, computes probabilities, and is essential for dealing effectively with the outside world (Berne, 1964, p. 27). It regulates the activities of the Parent and Child and mediates objectively between them. Characteristics of the Adult include being rational, thoughtful, objective, calculating, and reasonable, with all reactions based upon reality testing.

The Parent corresponds to the conscience and is borrowed or learned from parents or other authority figures. A Parent is moralistic and judgmental. Typical reactions include prejudice with dogmatic disapproval or nurturing with the Parent supporting and sympathizing. The role of the Parent is to save energy and lessen anxiety by making certain decisions automatic. The Parent is easily recognized by watching the gesturing and voice qualities of the individual and by noting his willingness to make decisions and take responsibility for others.

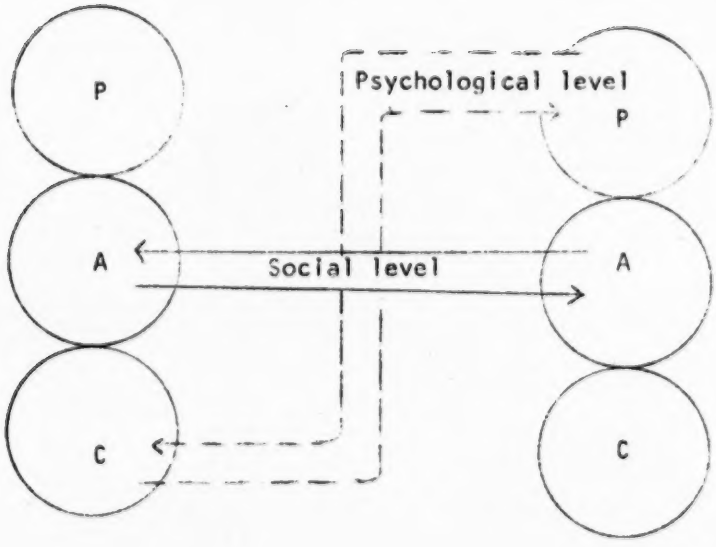
Beyond the three structures of personality there are three repetitive sets of social maneuvers: pastimes, games, and the more complex scripts.

Pastimes are transactions that are very straightforward and are not encumbered by hidden meaning. Pastimes serve to structure time and provide preliminary interactions that generate data for more complex relationships -- such as games. The apparent innocuous small talk ("ever been", "what became", "wardrobe", "who won", "how's the weather") confirms roles and stabilizes positions. Pastimes are the initial interactions engaged in while the participants identify the desired roles of those involved.

"Descriptively, a game is a recurring set of transactions, often repetitious, superficially plausible, with a concealed motivation....." (Berne, 1964, p. 48). It is with games that dissimilation in a relationship begins to occur. The chief characteristics of games are: (1) their ulterior quality, and (2) a payoff. It should be noted that games are engaged in because they have been learned from significant experiences in everyday living. They are fixed patterns of stimulus and response that provide comfort to the player in structuring his world and

FIGURE 1

Personality



"Why don't you...Yes, but"

self-assurance in obtaining expected outcomes, even though they may be destructive. The transactions are part of unconscious games played by innocent people who are not totally aware of the full implications of their behavior.

Finally, the games are a component of the participant's life plan or script. The series of games engaged in serve to fill time and advance the action toward either a constructive or destructive culmination. The script is all pervasive and forms the plan into which life games fall into place.

DIAGNOSIS OF OPERATING EGO STATES

Previously I have attempted to make a case for the psychologist being viewed as an authority figure or in transactional terms, a Parental figure. In order to structure the counseling interaction, however, it is necessary that he be astute in diagnosing the functional ego state of the parent or parents involved. This diagnosis is critical for implying future direction and is difficult given limited previous experience of the psychologist with the parents. The time limited nature of the school psychologist's involvement with parents necessitates rapid assessment of interaction styles and requires keen observational skills. The following discussion of diagnosis is directed toward behavioral clues available early in the interview. It must be emphasized that this is not a true diagnosis but rather a working hypothesis based on insufficient data.

Demeanor: Sternly paternal uprightness with body rigidity and omnipotent distance is characteristic of a Parental style. Also significant is sympathetic mothering implied by tilted head or reassuring glance. Thoughtful concentration suggests an Adult approach. The Child-like reaction of lowered or turned head as in sulking, cute smile, and coyness are prognostic.

Gestures: As expected, the forbidding gestures are Parental, referential gestures, Adult and warding off gestures, manifestations of the Child.

Voice: Very significant is the intonation of voice because we all have numerous voices with varying inflections. The voice varies from the "little" voice of the frightened or hurt Child to the strength of the infuriated Parent.

Vocabulary: Child - oaths, expletives, epithet

Parent - cute, naughty, low, vulgar, disgusting, ridiculous

Adult - unconstructive, apt, parsimonious, desirable (verbs and nouns)

The behavioral diagnosis is based foremost and primarily on clinical experience. Little time is available for corroboration so the psychologist must rely on his previously cultivated powers of observation and intuition. For those concerned with the tentative nature of this diagnosis it is important to realize that the observations and impressions gained are accumulated in all social situations. Additional clues can be gained from records, teachers' reports, reputation, and implications drawn from the parent's occupation and social position. We are not concerned with assigning treatments but rather forming impressions into a model which implies future action. Where interest remains in therapeutic diagnosis, the reader is referred to Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy (Berne, 1961).

PARENT GAMES

In order to provide a cursory example for demonstration purposes, the following game is reviewed. It is commonly encountered by the psychologist because he is seen as an expert and may try to live out this role fully in his professional practice. In lay terminology, the game is called "Why don't you - yes but". (See Figure 1) In this transaction, the parent comes in asking what should be done. The expert in residence then dutifully issues a, "why don't you...". The parent responds with, "yes, but...".

The transaction is circular with the psychologist acting from the Parental ego state (expert) supplying many suggestions with the parent promising to respond negatively from his Child ego state (helpless, but controlling). Obviously no progress

will be made in this relationship because the parent will have excuses for all suggestions and will end up angry with the psychologist who eventually will tire of making suggestions or exhaust his repetoire. The psychologist feels badly because he hasn't helped the parent. The appropriate reaction when a parent utilizing this style is encountered is to interrupt the game by refusing to participate. Only the most feasible suggestions should be offered and they should be limited in number. When the parent responds with a "yes, but...", the psychologist should reply that the suggestions offered are the best alternatives and it is up to the parent to try them or not. The psychologist refuses to take ultimate responsibility and does not become frustrated, which is the parent's payoff.

As an authority figure, the psychologist is often confronted by a parent who is playing, "Now I've Got You, You Son of a Bitch". In this transaction the psychologist dutifully describes the child's persisting behavior or outlines expected actions of the child with great detail and documentation. The diagnosis may be articulately presented and blatantly apparent; however, the parent manages to recall a segment of the child's behavior which contradicts the psychologist's conclusions. This may lead to the parents' overt criticism of the psychologist's findings and culminate with the parent summarily rejecting the psychologist's conclusions or recommendations. The pent-up furies of the parent are vented with great delight and vigor. The parent initially takes the offensive and then sits back with a wry smile while the psychologist recoils from the onslaught and meekly considers the obvious over-emphasis on an insignificant or isolated instance. The parent enjoys the battle and is confident when he manipulates the protagonist into a defensive position. In everyday life he looks meticulously for similar injustices and then proceeds to exploit them with much enthusiasm.

The best method for counteracting this game is to lay proper groundwork initially. The role of the psychologist is not to account for <u>all</u> behavior nor is he prepared to answer and document thoroughly all of his clinical impressions.

If an explanation of the psychologist's purpose is offered at the start of a conference, the pressure to present all the correct answers is reduced. Nevertheless, parents playing this game will attempt to augment it at some time. The psychologist should not feel compelled to respond in detail to the parents' reaction. He should yield gracefully without dispute, and proceed with his conference plan. An Adult to Adult response will not provide the parents with the expected response of argumentative Parent or whipped Child.

Another game often encountered is typical of the population in general and thus an obstacle for the school psychologist. It is called "Wooden Leg" with the thesis that the parent's disability or plight is so profound that it is not reasonable to hold them responsible for their actions. They thus evade responsibility by stimulating the Parent of those around them who respond with sympathy and an accompanying lowering of expectations. This is a very effective game because our society and public opinion in general support the individual's right to give up in the face of adversity. Physical distress, the stress of modern living, or grandma's neurosis are all grounds for exaggerated or imaginary disabilities. A related approach is to blame the condition on any or all others or entice acceptance by proposing that an eight day week would solve all problems.

Without a therapy situation the best approach to use with this game is rather straightforward. Neither Parental response of acceptance of the parent's pleas nor harsh rejection is constructive. The best approach is to refuse to pass judgment (Parent) but rather to make the parent specify a concrete commitment. "What do you expect of yourself?" However, the parent should never be let off the hook of accepting responsibility for their children or for stating verbally an expected course of action.

"See What You Made Me Do" is a very common game often encounterd in counseling and easily learned by children. The most common form consists of the parent deferring decisions to others so that later if things go wrong he can righteously complain that "you got me into this". Parents must be forced to choose the

ultimate decision and make a verbal commitment to it. The avoidance of responsibility and the resulting insulation from criticism for errors is psychologically very appealing. Thus, the psychologist can expect to incur the wrath of the parent who will most probably leave sulking and quite despondent.

A number of transactions which occur between psychologist and parent are either less common, seldom destructive, or more aptly described as pastimes. A short synopsis of these transactions is offered below; however, the reader is referred to the original sources for a more detailed discussion.

"Kick Me" is often seen in a situation where the individual structures things in such a way that he gets reprimanded. He may increase the severity of his transgressions until society (psychologist) can no longer condone his actions. From the outside it appears that he is banking his misfortunes in a savings account although his verbal response is typically "why does this always happen to me".

"Look How Hard I've Tried" is associated with "I'm blameless" or "I'm helpless". The parent will attempt to alleviate pressure for behavior change by reducing the emphasis on his behavior. The psychologist may have to release the parent and inform him that he can return for help later. This removes the evidence that he is in fact "trying" and relegates him to the original position with the problems still in existence but nothing occurring to help it.

"Ain't It Awful" takes several forms but is probably most easily distinguished by a detailed elaboration of gory details presented with great relish by the speaker. Other forms include "Nowadays" where the state of world affairs is degraded, or "Look what they're doing to me now". The overt distress gains sympathy and the gratification of much social support. This type of game is not very amenable to counselling because if sympathy is not offered the parent will leave and shop for a more understanding "doctor".

PSYCHOLOGIST GAMES

As important as recognizing and combating parent games, an even more critical skill is knowing one's self and recognizing susceptibility in certain interactions. The following games are typical of psychologists and must be avoided if progress in parent counseling is to occur.

"I'm Only Trying To Help You" occurs when the psychologist begins to feel frustrated with the parent who returns repeatedly and reports that the psychologist's suggestions have failed. The situation deteriorates when the psychologist begins to feel inadequate. The payoff is bewilderment at the parents' ingratitude and confirms the underlying assumption of the "Parent" that people are disappointing and do not appreciate professional skill and attention. Typical Parental reactions are "Look What You Made Me Do", "Look How Hard I'm Trying", and "There's Nothing You Can Do To Help Me". The psychological paradigm functioning in this game is the psychologist (Parent) who says, "See how adequate I am", and the parent (Child) who agrees to "make you feel inadequate". The appropriate response to this game is to refuse to accept the invitation to play by ignoring the parent's subtle questioning of the psychologist's competency. Issuing directives for action must be avoided with an emphasis on being a counselor and not the parent's manager. Suggestions are offered but the parents choose a course of action. It must be remembered that hard game players will become furious when frustrated and may belittle the psychologist directly and slander him publicly. The psychologist's needs as helper, savior, and martyr make him particularly susceptible to this game.

A second game which is not as overtly destructive yet delays or inhibits positive change is "Gee You're Wonderful Professor". In this interaction the parent listens attentively as the psychologist develops an elaborate and richly detailed diagnosis complete with recommendations. The parent then dutifully rewards the psychologist for his uncommonly perceptive qualities and praises his wonderful treatment to all who will listen. The truth of the matter, however, is

that symptoms persist, no corrective action is taken, and therefore, no change occurs. The parent leaves counseling bewildered by the psychologist's naivete' or overtly laughing at his sweet innocence. The school psychologist's only alternative in these situations is not to be enthralled by the patient's reports and to institute adequate follow-up procedures. This game is hard to interrupt because of the social reward value and may require referral for more thorough treatment.

The final psychologist game to be discussed at length is "Psychiatry". In this game the psychologist assumes the position that "I am a healer", complete with a diploma which "...says here I am a healer." (Berne, 1964, p. 154). The parent's Child reaction is that he will never be cured but he will be a better client (neurotic). The parent becomes very adept at using the proper terms and proceeds to explore history, reveal feelings, formulate questions, and free-associate on command. The conclusion is that constructive action is not taken because the correct analysis or solution has not been arrived at. This game is pervasive because of its general nature and its relation to the other therapeutic games.

Another game characteristic of the psychologist but abstracted here in the interest of space is "confused" (name my own). In this transaction the parent (Child) offers the psychologist a fruit basket of symptoms or verbalizations and asks for a synthesis. The psychologist (Parent) in his all-knowing way works very hard but in the final frustration acknowledges his confusion. The circular action continues because the psychologist isn't effective (Parent) until he "understands" and the parent (Child) gleefully enjoys the obvious frustration. The psychologist must refuse to accept the responsibility for the confusion and insist that the parent provide the effort in removing the "fruit basket".

SUMMARY OF APPROPRIATE COUNSELOR RESPONSES

The value of Transactional Analysis as a model is derived partially from the conceptual organization it provides for the counseling process but primarily the direction the model implies for counselor responses. The first and most important goal for counseling taken from this schema is that the counselor's efforts should be directed toward "hooking" the parent's Adult and utilizing direct Adult to Adult transactions for counseling. If Parent and Child encounters are stimulated, then the potential for destructive games or wasteful time structuring is increased. There is probably a direct relationship between the amount of time spent in straightforward Adult interactions and the degree of counseling success.

In order to structure the counseling session to promote the desired transaction the psychologist must be constantly aware of his behavior and monitor the ego state from which he is responding. I feel the most crucial phase of counseling is the initial period when the psychologist must neutralize the parent's expectation or desire to work with a Parental figure. An appropriate way to avoid being "hooked" during the pastime phase of social intercourse is systematically to avoid responding as the parent expects. Since the parent is approaching the conference or counseling session expecting an expert or authority figure to dutifully treat the situation in earnest seriousness, I attempt to disrupt their expectation. In this situation I spend the initial minutes laughing lightly (Child) or discussing humorous topics or ones of mutual interest. If the session is to be worthwhile the psychologist must interrupt the parent's attempt to engage him in Parental games and must not structure the situation as deathly serious or anxiety charged (poor learning situation -- defenses aroused). The psychologist's initial behavior sets the tone, thwarts the parent's early attempts in establishing comfortable and expected pastimes, and establishes the psychologist's role.

For the sake of brevity a number of counselor actions derived from the theory are presented in tabular form. The intent is not to diminish the importance of these recommendations, but rather to catalog for ease of reference.

APPROPRIATE COUNSELOR RESPONSES

1. Establish responsibility clearly. The parent is ultimately responsible for the child and the counseling session. If the psychologist accepts the responsibility he must be ready to assume the parental role. Only in cases of extreme crises must he intervene and take charge.
2. Be concrete, specific, and document findings - Adult stance.
3. Hold parents accountable but do not punish.
4. Be careful in employing support, reassurance, persuasion, or exhortation (all Parental responses).
5. Also be careful in proposing solutions and question your motives when dictating action.
6. The essential feature of a game is the culmination. If you do not provide the payoff by becoming frustrated, angry, confused or hurt, the game can be interrupted.
7. Parents must be permitted to save face and often must be given something in return for giving up their customary behavior.
8. There are some situations where a double-bind exists and the psychologist cannot come away unscathed. He must be willing to endure criticism and at times the wrath of the frustrated parent.
9. The counselor must monitor his voice inflection, vocabulary, gestures, body expression, and total demeanor to insure the desired effect.
10. Obtain a verbal commitment for action (or inaction) from the parent. This is an Adult action and implies functioning of the desired ego state.

11. Games employed by parents are taught to children with similar results predicted. Therefore, it is wise to return to the classroom to provide the teacher with intervention techniques appropriate for handling the child. It is also true that teachers have consistent and stereotyped behavior patterns that stimulate similar transactions with their students.
12. The counselor is a model for the counselee to emulate. He is responsible for himself, goal directed, and action oriented. He knows what he is doing and goes about it in a systematic way thus avoiding enticements to "play" or forget goals.
13. An expected problem involved in working from the Adult ego state is the possibility of intellectualizing. This must be confronted by a problem centered emphasis.
14. Consider carefully the amount of verbal interaction. A significant portion should be the parents.
15. You are not "curing" anyone -- you are structuring a game free situation where counseling goal achievement is maximized.
16. Be very careful with interpretations and confrontations.
17. It must be remembered that the ultimate antithesis of most games is to refrain from playing.

The purpose in proposing the Transactional Analysis model has been to aid the psychologist in organizing counseling data and in generating desirable counseling responses. In addition, the school psychologist should find the model useful for inservice training programs designed to increase the proficiency of teachers and consultants in analyzing problems in parent counseling and parent conferences. While the theory is not proposed as an all inclusive answer, or the only available model, it is advanced as a very helpful tool.

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